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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002623

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINSKISL](#) [MY](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: CONTINUED GRP-MILF COMMITMENT TO PEACE PROCESS

REF: MANILA 2013 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Pol/C Scott Bellard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Following a claim by the MILF for an additional 1,000 wards as Muslim-dominated ancestral domain, the Government of Malaysia will help to facilitate a joint survey by GRP/MILF census experts, with a goal of completion by October 2006. The GRP believes that the MILF also remains committed to the peace process but is under increased pressure from religious leaders and faces internal strains. The Swedish government is providing technical assistance on possible disarmament models, but this would likely not figure in the initial peace accord. The GRP hopes for an interim peace accord by late 2006 or early 2007, possibly bypassing final resolution of both ancestral domain and disarmament, while aiming to work out these and other "details" in a "political transition" over six to ten years. It seems increasingly clear that both sides now view improvements in the situation on the ground - where peace is growing and where the MILF is increasingly cooperating against crime and terrorism -- as the key goal, not agreement on the substance of a written accord. We need to continue our assistance efforts to promote these positive developments on the ground, whatever happens with the substance of the interim or "final" peace accord. End Summary.

¶2. (C) More demands: Chairman of the GRP Negotiating Panel with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Silvestre Afable provided additional details about the latest snag (reftel) in the ancestral domain talks between the GRP and the MILF in May. In addition to the 600 wards ("barangays," the smallest governmental unit in the Philippines) offered up by the GRP as Bangsamoro ancestral domain, the MILF claimed 1000 more wards as either currently or historically Muslim-dominated. The GRP has asked the Government of Malaysia to oversee a joint or even tri-partite technical survey, which would initially include some technical training for MILF representatives by the Philippine National Census Board. Due to a clear lack of MILF expertise and insufficient personnel (as many as 4,000 census workers might be necessary), Afable said that he had encouraged the MILF to appoint representatives from civil society instead of or in addition to MILF officials. He predicted that the one-month training could start as early as July, with the joint census taking about two months. His goal would be to have its recommendations by October. Afable said that the GRP would nonetheless insist on making the final decisions based on current social demographics, not historical data, and expressed optimism that the MILF would ultimately go along, once it had participated in the joint survey and seen conditions on the ground in these wards. He explained, however, that these communities would ultimately have a free choice to decide in a referendum whether or not they wished to be part of a new Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, which he said would only be phased in after the end of the current

tenure of elected officials in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in 2008. Afable claimed that ongoing MILF/MNLF talks were making some progress, although the future status and role of Nur Misuari remained unresolved issues.

13. (C) MILF dynamics: Afable suggested that the MILF Central Committee was coming under increased pressure to make additional demands from various religious leaders (ulamas), and commented that the Central Committee did not appear as unified as it had a year or even six months ago. He admitted the possibility of a splintering of the MILF Central Committee, but said that the GRP wanted the splinter to be as "small as possible." He claimed that the MILF leadership under Chairman Murad nonetheless remained committed to the peace process and an eventual peace accord. He inquired about the possibility of bringing members of the MILF Peace Panel, along with GRP Panel representatives, to Washington in the next couple of months to meet with NGOs, the USG, and Congress. Pol/C noted potential visa problems, and urged that Afable share names of possible participants with Embassy soonest in order to begin vetting process to avoid such problems.

14. (C) Disarmament: Afable explained that the Government of Sweden in May had provided five disarmament experts to meet with the MILF. The next step will be a seminar in Malaysia. He claimed that the MILF was "open" to the concept of disarmament, but had insisted that it be "across-the-board," notably including weapons belonging to local political chiefs not necessarily affiliated with the MILF or MNLF. He said that the Swedes had pushed the idea of creating a combatant database -- names, addresses, photos -- in order to have a very clear picture of the problem, and

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that the MILF was willing to consider working with a "third party" on such a project. He noted that MILF "regular troops" might only be two or three thousand men, with up to another 10,000 more like local militia, not all of whom were even armed. He welcomed an eventual role for USAID in a program like LEAP for MNLF ex-combatants.

15. (C) Prognosis: Despite the hurdles ahead, Afable opined that the two sides might "bypass" the final resolution of ancestral domain and disarmament and move to sign a sort of interim agreement as early as fall 2006, or more realistically in early 2007. He claimed that both sides clearly understand that an extended period -- perhaps six to ten years -- of "political transition" will be necessary to work out final details on these two key remaining issues as well as to seek a modus vivendi with the ARMM in the meantime, while pressing for Constitutional change ideally leading initially to expanded autonomy and, eventually, to a federal system.

16. (C) Comment: The apparent ever-lowering of the bar of what it would take to achieve a "peace accord" is disappointing, but mostly in an ideal world in which the written word is the goal. In the real world of Mindanao, it may be instead a valid recognition by both sides that what truly counts most is the growing peace on the ground, with better hopes for prosperity and development, and a greater weaning away of the MILF from terrorist links with the ASG and JI, along with enhanced GRP-MILF cooperation against crime and terrorism through the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group. If this can continue even absent a meeting of minds yet about the logistics and substance of the post-accord era, it may be an acceptable risk for both sides that we should continue to encourage and support with new assistance programs, as security permits.
Kenney